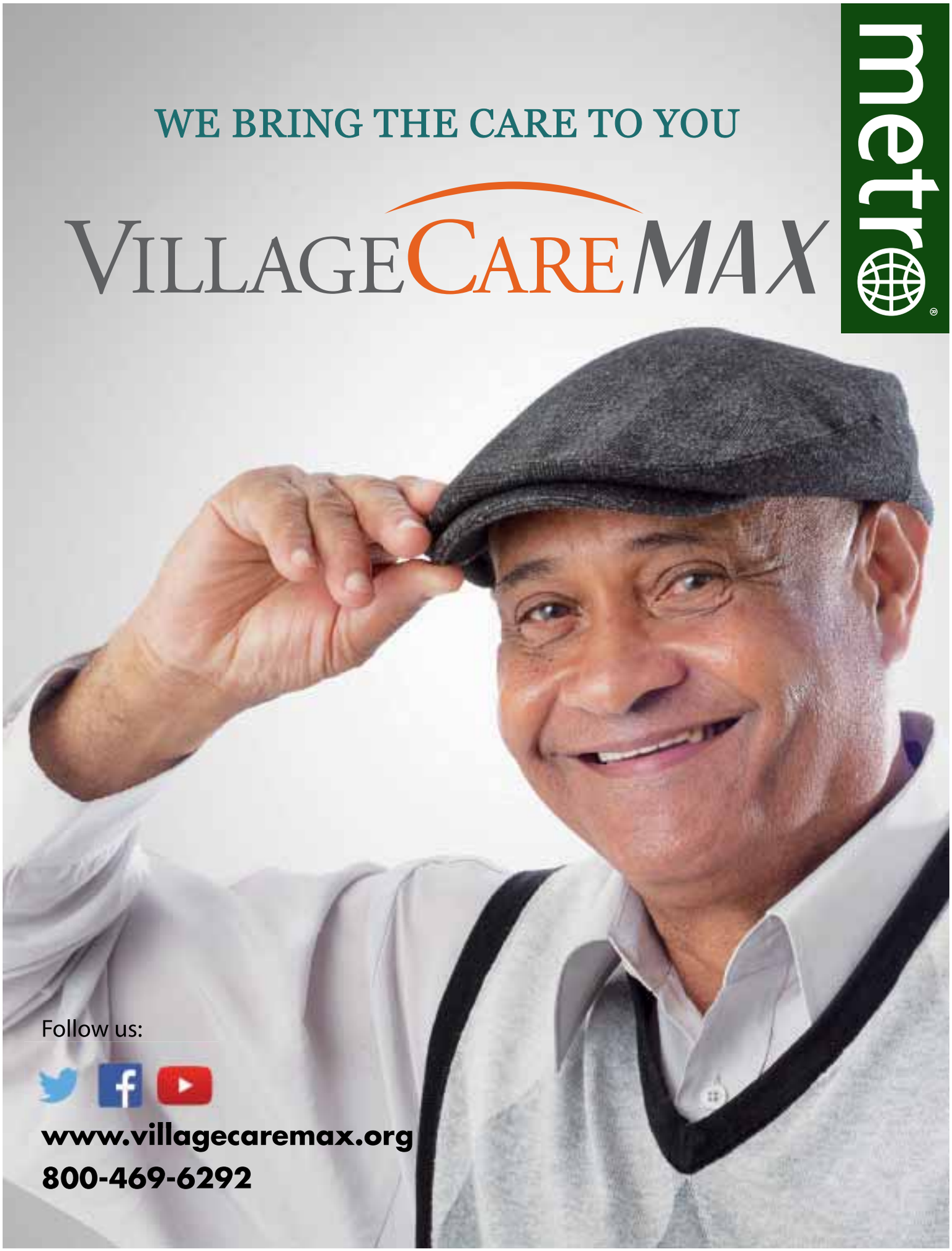
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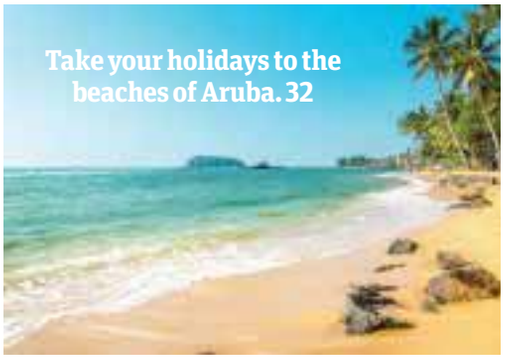

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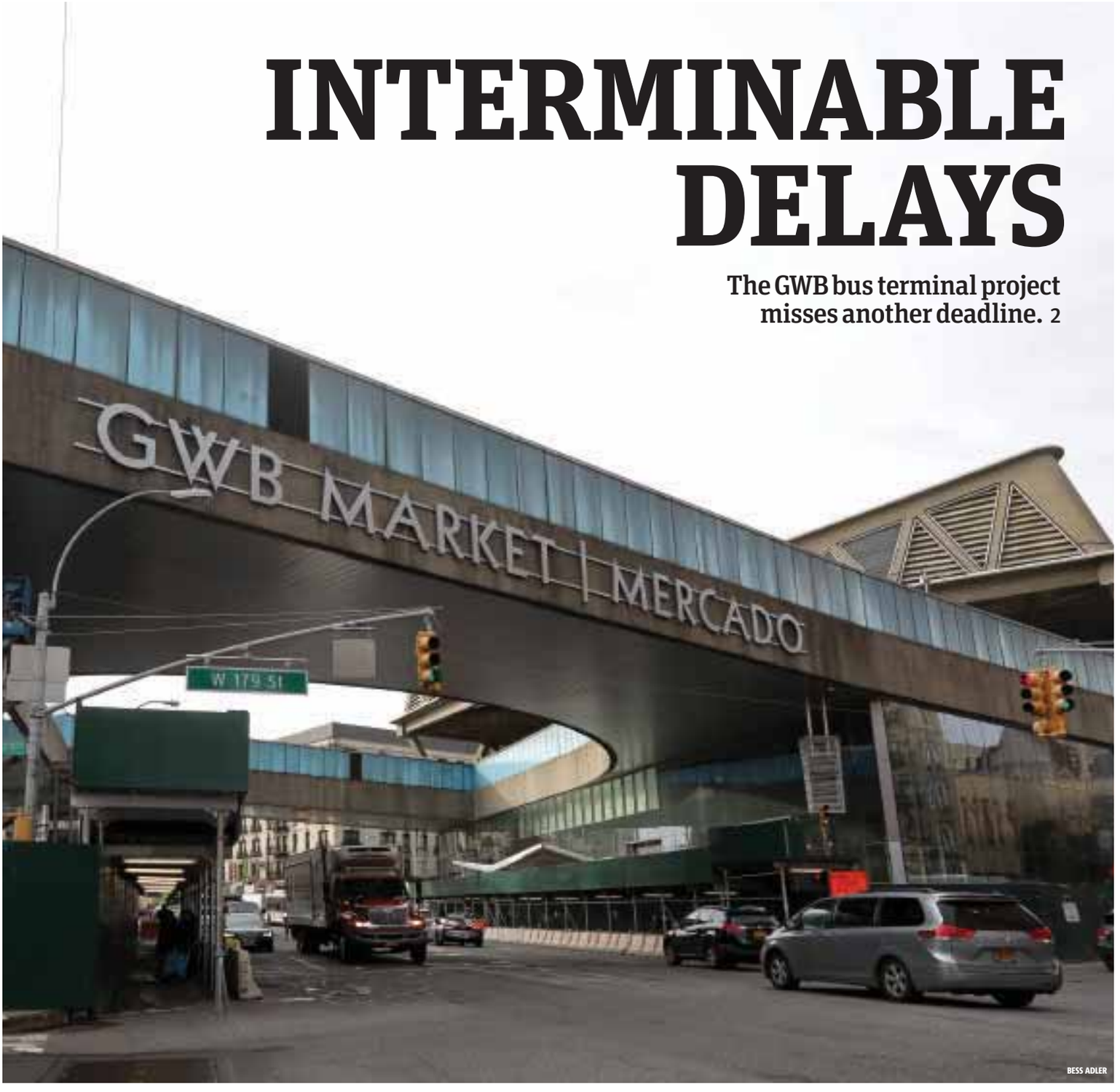
We've got the perfect something for everyone on your list in our Gift Guide. 27-30

Sid Rosenberg: Bank on big game from Eli vs. Cowboys. 37

INTERMINABLE DELAYS

The GWB bus terminal project misses another deadline. 2



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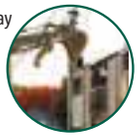
1. What did an NYPD officer allegedly do with a suspect in the Bronx to determine whether or not to arrest him for playing dice on a street corner?

2. Over his career, what is Eli Manning's QB rating vs. the Cowboys?

3. How do Arubans wish each other a happy New Year?

3 things you need to know

SEARCH COMPLETED AT OAKLAND WAREHOUSE IN FIRE THAT KILLED 36



Authorities concluded their search on Wednesday of an Oakland warehouse gutted by a fast-moving fire that killed 36 people during a dance party, a police official said. The blaze erupted Friday in a sprawling two-story building known as the Ghost Ship that was leased to an artists' collective. Oakland police spokeswoman Johnna Watson told local television station KRON at a news conference that investigators are moving debris away from the charred remains of the warehouse to piece through the material. "Officially the search for any additional victims has concluded and unfortunately the toll is 36," Watson told KRON. The cause of the blaze has yet to be determined, but investigators are focusing on a particular appliance at the building. REUTERS

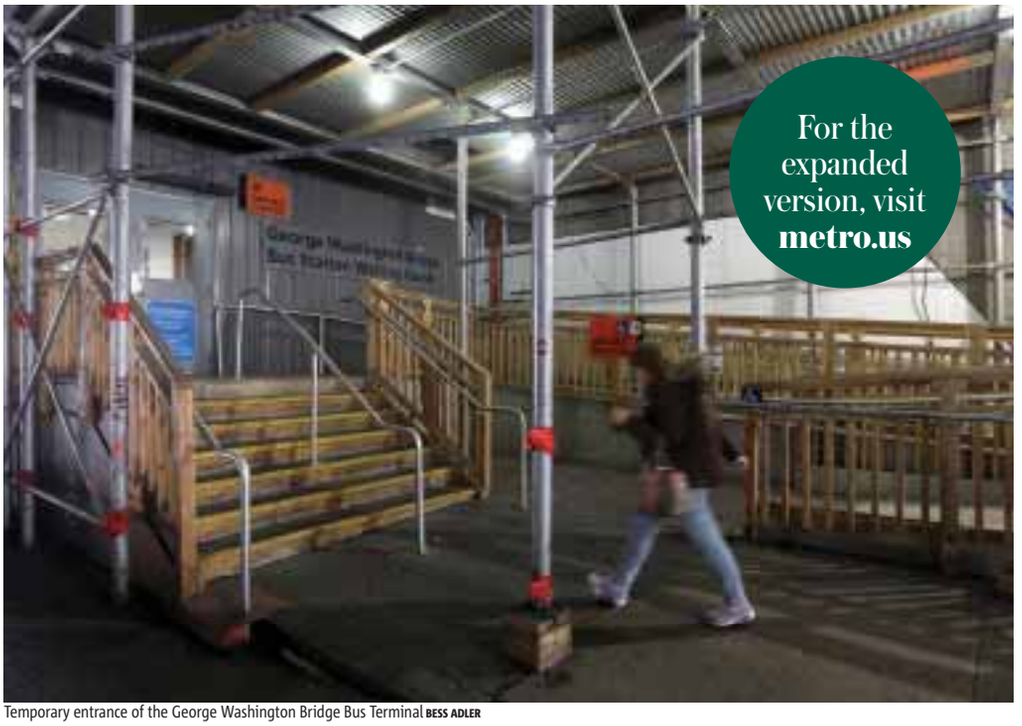
REPUBLICAN FCC COMMISSIONERS URGE QUICK REVERSAL OF OBAMA RULES

2 Two Republican Federal Communications Commissioners say the Trump administration should reverse many significant policies set by the telecommunications and cable regulatory body under President Obama. FCC Commissioner Mike O'Rielly said at an event at the National Press Club that the FCC under President Donald Trump needs to "undo the more harmful policies adopted by the current commission. ... The policy direction chosen in these instances was wrongheaded, harmful to consumers and the industry, costly, and ultimately unworthy of continuation." FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai said he hoped the commission would eliminate many regulations, propose fewer new actions and seek guidance from Congress before taking many actions. He said the commission should take a "weed whacker" to unneeded rules. REUTERS

US SENATE JOINS HOUSE TO PASS SWEEPING NEW HEALTH BILL

3 The U.S. Senate on Wednesday voted overwhelmingly to support sweeping new legislation that will reshape the way the Food and Drug Administration approves new medicines. It will also provide funding for cancer and Alzheimer's research and grants to help fight the opioid epidemic. Two years in the making, the 21st Century Cures Act was passed last week by the House of Representatives and will now go to President Barack Obama to sign into law. Supporters say it will speed access to new drugs and devices by allowing clinical trials to be designed with fewer patients and cheaper, easier to achieve goals.

REUTERS



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Temporary entrance of the George Washington Bridge Bus Terminal BESS ADLER

Port Authority mum as GWB bus terminal renovation blows December deadline

Riders and retailers feel misled as construction is extended at least four more months.

AMANDA MIKELBERG
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The $183 million renovation of the George Washington Bridge bus terminal in upper Manhattan, which began eight years ago, will not be completed by its December 2016 target, according to developers.

Lawmakers and locals are balking at talking about the problematic delay that affects five million annual riders of NJ Transit buses and other carriers, as well as the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey's apparent lack of forthrightness.

"It has tremendous impact on the thousands coming in and out every day. It's not minor. It's major," Chair of Community Board 12 Shah A. Ally told Metro. "We would have liked to see more diligence on the Port Authority. More troubling is the lack of information provided about the delays … [it] puts a bad taste in our mouths. They made an enemy of the project."

Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer said she is awaiting answers.

"My office contacted the Port Authority with a number of concerns about this terminal, including the construction delays, and they've said they're getting us answers and will meet with us to provide updates this month, Brewer said.

She added: "The George Washington Bridge bus terminal is an economic engine for upper Manhattan and a crucial transportation link — it needs to get done."

Since 2014, the station that anchors the busiest bridge on Earth has been reduced to a staircase with concrete barricades improvising a landing at the corner of 179th Street and Fort Washington Avenue; arriving passengers can take another staircase on 178th Street. Scaffolding shelters a trailer for ticketing, restrooms and waiting, and a single narrow platform provides boarding for all passengers on all buses.

There are no elevators or escalators, and disabled riders must call a number in advance for pickup on Fort Washington Avenue.

Port Authority representatives deferred all of Metro's questions, including queries about the new bus routes and service expansion the agency promised, to the development company sharing in the project's costs, the George Washington Bridge Bus Station Development Venture (GWBBS).

GWBBS representative Javier Gomez told Metro his company has advised the Port Authority that it could take until April 2017 for the station to be ready to reopen.

"Reconstruction progress of the GWB Bus Terminal has reached 90 percent completion," Gomez said in a statement. "The final phase consists mainly of integrating and testing all of the new systems that we are putting in place, into one smooth cohesive operation. These systems include, but are not limited to, safety, energy, computers, utilities and other vital components …"

The Port Authority would only say is that it has been fining GWBBS $5,000 a day since April.

The overhaul of the decrepit 1963 construction was first announced in 2008, but because of the recession, Hurricane Sandy and myriad obstacles, the groundbreaking was shelved until summer 2014. The renovation plans boasted increased retail space from 30,000 to 120,000 square feet and expanded bus service and capacity.

Electrical wiring, plumbing and apparently the majority of the work on the bus terminals themselves, remain undone.

Construction appeared to be furthest along what seemed to be the retail spaces for Marshalls, Gap, Time Warner, Blink Fitness, Fine Fare supermarket and Buffalo Wild Wings. Smaller spaces for the locally owned businesses such as Pick and Eat and Buunni Coffee, which signed leases back in 2015 and have been losing money because the developers raised rent to offset expenses, also look close to complete.

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Two toddlers fatally burned by steam in Bronx apartment

"We call them the Disney kids because they're so gorgeous," a neighbor said of the young victims.

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Ibanez, left, and Scylee-Vayoh Ambrose. FACEBOOK/ PETER AMBROSE

"The father had the girl on his shoulder. ... [The babies] were both totally purple."
Annie Martinez

Two young girls were killed Wednesday after being severely burned from a steam leak in their Bronx apartment, authorities said.

Scylee-Vayoh Ambrose, 1, and Ibanez Ambrose, 2, were burned at about noon in a first-floor apartment on Hunts Point Avenue near Spofford Avenue in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx. They were taken to Lincoln Hospital, where they were both pronounced dead.

According to published reports, a valve popped off the heater, causing the girls to be burned by the steam.

"A radiator blew," an FDNY source told the New York Daily News. "It's very bad."

A neighbor told ABC7 she ran to the apartment, where steam was coming out from the closed door, when she heard the children's mother scream.

Another neighbor said both parents ran from the building carrying the tiny bodies.

"[The mom] had the baby on the ground trying to make [her] alive, pumping her heart," Annie Martinez, 47, told the Daily News.

"The father had the girl on his shoulder. … [The babies] were both totally purple."

Bronx News 12 said the apartment is designated for homeless families and the Daily News reported that the family is from Maine. The mother plays guitar and the father is a tattoo artist.

"We call them the Disney kids because they're so gorgeous," neighbor Tye Wiggins, 28, said of the two girls, the Daily News reported. "Blue eyes, blonde hair. They're literally like, magical. Every time you see those two little girls, you smile."

"There's never a day that you see [the parents] without their girls," Wiggins continued. "It's heartbreaking. This could have happened to anyone of us in the building."

With yet another tragedy in New York, "transparency is key," Comptroller Scott Stringer said.

"We've lost two more of our youngest, most vulnerable New Yorkers," Stringer said. "It comes as the homeless population has just reached yet another record high, and the number of children in the [Department of Homeless Services] system is soaring. We have to do better."

An NYPD spokeswoman said the investigation is ongoing, but a criminal act is not suspected.

"We will certainly be looking at Building Department records, previous complaints, outstanding complaints, current complaints," FDNY Chief Michael Gala told the Daily News.

Neighbors said the building regularly has heating issues.

"In my house I had to close [the radiator]," Martinez told the Daily News. "The heat, I couldn't breathe. This building is always having problems."

NYC program provides financial incentive to house the homeless

Open your heart and home to the less fortunate and you will be rewarded — by New York City.

Applications are being accepted through the end of December for a program called "Home for the Holidays," which provides up to $1,800 a month to the friends and relatives of homeless families who take them in.

The goal is to bring 5,000 qualifying families out of the city's perpetually overburdened homeless shelters, where about 60,000 people — 24,000 of them children — now sleep each night.

NYC/CREATIVE COMMONS

"With the holidays, we wanted to redouble our efforts to reconnect people with their families," said Steven Banks, Department of Homeless Service commissioner.

The program will both reduce costs and help unburden shelters, officials said.

According to figures, the city now spends $1.6 billion a year to combat homelessness.

"The situation has built up over many decades, and in the city everyone has a role to play," Banks said.

The hosts must have a pre-existing relationship with the homeless and be willing to house them for at least three months, and no more than a year. The host and the homeless family will each get $500 at the time of move-in.

After that, the city will pay the host $1,200, $1,500 or $1,800 a month depending on the size of the family the host takes in. AMANDA MIKELBERG

For the expanded version, visit metro.us

BRIEF

NYPD: Handcuffed suspect rolled dice to decide his fate

For a man picked up by an NYPD officer while hanging out with his friends on a Bronx street, his fate was literally left to chance.

Officer David Terrell of the 42nd Precinct took Kenny Shenery, 25, into custody earlier this year as he was playing dice with friends on a Claremont street. Shenery was handcuffed and placed in Terrell's patrol car.

"There was no reason, we were just playing dice," Shenery now tells NBC4.

Terrell told Shenery's friends he would let him go if he lost a round of dice, a police source told the New York Daily News, adding that if Terrell won, Shenery's friends would also be taken into custody.

"It wasn't a joke, he gambled for my freedom," Shenery said.

When Terrell lost the dice game, the crowd cheered, and the smiling officer can be seen walking away.

Terrell, however, did not uphold his promise, and Shenery was not set free. He was put through the court system for two days for playing loud music, he said. "I didn't even have a radio in my car," he added.

Terrell, who was promoted to detective after the dice-playing incident, has since been stripped of his shield and gun and placed on modified duty early last month following a domestic incident while he was off-duty, the Daily News reported.

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1- "White Mulberry Supplement as Adjuvant Treatment of Obesity", Journal of Biological Regulators and Homeostatics Agents., Vol 28, no.1, 2014.

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Why many Manhattan renters are 'at their breaking point'

"There remains a disconnect between what tenants can afford to pay, and what landlords believe tenants can afford to pay."

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PIXABAY

A newly released report found that despite a slight decline in rents across the board in Manhattan and increases in landlord incentives, there is still a disconnect between what landlords are offering and what tenants can afford to pay.

Citi Habitats released its Rental Market Analysis for November 2016 Thursday, showing that the borough's vacancy rose to 2.11 percent — the highest rate in more than seven years.

On average, apartments in the borough rented for $3,490 in November 2016, $8 less than the previous month. This decrease came to a 1 percent dip in all size units, from studios to three-bedrooms. But on a year-to-year comparison, rents increased by $26.

November's vacancy rate increased from both the previous year, and at 2.11 percent is the highest it's been in Manhattan since April 2009, according to Citi Habitats data. Specifically, the vacancy rate was highest in the West Village at 2.69 percent, followed by the Upper West Side at 2.23 percent.

"There remains a disconnect between what tenants can afford to pay, and what landlords believe tenants can afford to pay. Many people are simply at their breaking point. Building owners continue to lean on concessions to drive traffic, but these incentives have yet to lower the vacancy rate as anticipated," said Citi Habitats President Gary Malin.

Citi Habitats found that 27 percent of rental transactions brokered by them offered a free month's rent and/or payment of the broker fee to entice new tenants in November — up from 1 percent in October and 13 percent in November 2015.

Rent concessions and other incentives are aimed mostly at the upper end of the market, according to real estate experts. They are typically limited to the upper 40 percent, with the biggest bargains going to the top 10 percent.

Concessions can be a "tale of two markets," according to Malin, because they are usually effective for the terms of the initial lease.

"Those who can afford the apartment — incentive or not — are getting great discounts," he added. "However, if a client is on the fence financially, current offers are still giving them pause versus spurring them to act immediately. They are thinking not of the cost of year one when the incentive's in play — but Year 2, when it's off the field."

BRIEF

Donate to Metro's Toy Drive

In keeping with the holiday spirit of giving, Metro is once again launching Metro Magic, our annual toy drive for underprivileged children in New York, Boston and Philadelphia.

This year marks the 7th anniversary of the toy drive, which was renamed in memory of the man who oversaw the project for more than four years, Tony Metcalf, Metro's longest-running editor in chief. Mr. Metcalf passed away in 2013 from colon cancer at the age of 50.

Mr. Metcalf lit up every year as he saw the faces of children unwrap their holiday gifts. It is our goal to keep that magic alive.

"Tony felt we should use the size and scale of Metro to help other's and he used enormous dedication and force to execute the project and every year make children in need a little happier during the holiday season," said Metro's Chief Executive Officer Yggers Mortensen.

"I am proud to continue this project in honor of Tony and I hope all our readers, suppliers and members of the Metro team will help to make this yet another great Metro Magic year."

Metro has created a wish list at the Target website that readers can access by going to Metro.us and clicking on the Tony's Metro Magic story on the homepage.

From there, just choose the toys you wish to donate, pay online using Target's secure payment system, and your gifts, along with your name attached, will be delivered to Metro's offices in each city.

This season, we hope you will remember the children who will spend the holidays in shelters or who may not have gifts to open. Even one small gift can make a big difference in a child's holiday season.

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Survivor of SC church massacre calls Dylann Roof 'evil'

Roof, an avowed white supremacist, faces 33 federal counts of hate crimes resulting in death, obstruction of religion and firearms violations stemming from the attack. The 22-year-old also will face the death penalty in a state murder case.

Dylann Roof listens to proceedings during a hearing at the Judicial Center on July 16, 2015, in Charleston, South Carolina. GETTY IMAGES

The black South Carolina churchgoers who welcomed Dylann Roof to their Bible study last year thought he was a harmless young man looking for a place to pray, but a survivor of the shooting he is accused of carrying out there called him "evil" on Wednesday.

Nine people died in the massacre at Charleston's historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on June 17, 2015. Three others at the Bible study, including Felicia Sanders, 59, and her 11-year-old granddaughter, survived.

"There were so many shots," said Sanders, the first witness to testify at Roof's federal death penalty trial. "Seventy-seven shots in that room from someone we thought was looking for the Lord."

Sanders said she played dead as the blood of her dying son, Tywanza Sanders, 26, and aunt, Susie Jackson, 87, pooled around her.

"He is evil," Sanders said. "There is no place left on Earth for him except the pit of hell."

Roof planned the attack in retaliation for perceived offenses against his race, Assistant U.S. Attorney Jay Richardson said in his opening statement after a jury was seated earlier in the day.

Roof scouted the church for months, stockpiled ammunition and practiced firing the gun he bought in 2015, the prosecutor said.

On the muggy night Roof carried out his plan, he waited until parishioners stood to pray a half-hour into their meeting before firing his .45-caliber pistol, Richardson said.

His first target was the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, the church's pastor and a state senator, who had offered Roof the seat beside him at the Bible study.

"You don't have to do this. We mean you no harm," Tywanza Sanders told Roof, Richardson said.

Spouting white supremacist views, Roof then shot and killed the man, the prosecutor said.

Roof told Polly Sheppard, who was praying out loud, that he would let her live to tell the story of what he had done.

He confessed to the killings to federal agents when he was apprehended in North Carolina after an overnight manhunt.

Richardson said Roof had been spreading his message before the shootings by publishing an online racist manifesto and writing in his journal about his hopes for a race war.

Defense attorney David Bruck told jurors the facts of the crime were not in dispute and began laying the groundwork to argue for a life sentence rather than execution, asking jurors to focus on what factors drove Roof to commit an act that made no sense.

"By my count, [Roof] said, 'I had to do it' about 10 times. What does that suggest to you?" Bruck asked. "Watch carefully his dispassionate affect and ask yourself what that means." REUTERS

BRIEF

Georgia officer killed, second wounded in shooting near university

A young Georgia police officer was shot and killed and a second critically injured while responding to a report of a domestic dispute on Wednesday near a university campus in the southwestern part of the state, officials said.

Officers Ryan Smarr and Jodi Smith were shot as they responded to a 911 call for help in the city of Americus, about 150 miles south of Atlanta, where Georgia Southwestern State University is located, officials said.

The nearby campus was immediately put on lockdown, as officers searched for Minguel Lembrick, 32, the man believed to be the shooter, said Georgia Bureau of Investigation spokeswoman Nelly Miles.

Smarr, a 25-year-old recent hire at the Americus Police Department, died in the attack. Smith, an officer with the campus police whose age was not released, is in critical condition, said Americus police spokeswoman Phyllis Whitley-Banks.

Both were taken to a hospital in nearby Macon. REUTERS

Donald Trump fills Homeland Security, environment, China ambassador jobs

President-elect Donald Trump GETTY IMAGES

Trump continued to build his Cabinet as he prepares to take office on Jan. 20.

President-elect Donald Trump on Wednesday picked a fossil fuel industry defender as his top environmental official, another retired general as Homeland Security chief and Iowa's governor as U.S. ambassador to China in choices at odds with some of his recent pronouncements.

Trump said Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, 48, would be nominated to head the Environmental Protection Agency. Pruitt sued the EPA in a bid to undo a key regulation under outgoing President Barack Obama that would curb greenhouse gas emissions blamed for climate change, mainly from coal-fired power plants.

Trump tapped retired Marine Corps General John Kelly, 66, for secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, which controls immigration. Kelly, the third retired general named by Trump to a senior administration post, last year told Congress that a lack of security on the U.S.-Mexican border posed a threat to the United States.

Trump's transition team said Republican Iowa Governor Terry Branstad, 70, who has boasted of close ties to Beijing's leaders, was picked as U.S. ambassador to China.

All three posts require Senate confirmation.

Pruitt's selection came despite a softer tone Trump has struck on environmental regulation since his Nov. 8 election. He has stepped back from casting climate change as a hoax, signaled he might be willing to allow the United States to continue participating in the Paris climate change deal aimed at lowering world carbon emissions.

Pruitt's selection brought a quick rebuke from Democrats.

"The head of the EPA cannot be a stenographer for the lobbyists of polluters and Big Oil," House of Representatives Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi said of Pruitt.

Trump talked tough during the campaign about deporting all of the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States and building a wall along the Mexican border. But since the election he has softened his comments on deportation and referred to some illegal immigrants "terrific people."

Kelly would work in tandem with Republican Sen. Jeff Sessions, Trump's pick for attorney general who is a leading advocate of cracking down on illegal immigration.

Kelly would head a department in charge of securing borders against illegal immigration, protecting the president, responding to natural disasters and coordinating intelligence and counterterrorism.

He formerly headed the Southern Command, responsible for U.S. military activities and relationships in Latin America and the Caribbean. He was a proponent of keeping open the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Branstad has been an eager trading partner with China, helping Iowa sell agricultural goods to the Asian powerhouse. His choice came after Trump rattled the world's second-largest economy with tough talk on trade and a telephone call with the leader of Taiwan.

Some experts fear Trump will spark a trade war with Beijing given his threats to slap steep tariffs on Chinese goods and label China a currency manipulator in order to unfairly sell its products to the United States. REUTERS

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Trump chooses pro wrestling magnate Linda McMahon to head SBA

Donald Trump said on Wednesday he will nominate professional wrestling magnate and former Senate candidate Linda McMahon as his choice to head the Small Business Administration.

Trump's announcement said McMahon would be a key player in his effort to generate stronger job growth and roll back federal regulations.

McMahon, 68, is a co-founder and former CEO of the professional wrestling franchise WWE, which is based in Stamford, Connecticut. She ran unsuccessfully for a U.S. Senate seat in Connecticut in 2010. She was an early supporter of Trump's presidential campaign.

Linda McMahon GETTY IMAGES

The SBA, which has at least one office in every U.S. state, provides support to small businesses such as by extending loans and making sure they get a percentage of federal contracts.

Trump said McMahon had helped the WWE grow from a 13-person operation to a publicly traded global enterprise with more than 800 employees worldwide.

Trump is a WWE Hall of Fame member.

If confirmed by the Senate, McMahon would join a Trump economic team that includes Wall Street executives Steven Mnuchin at the Treasury Department and Wilbur Ross at Commerce.

"Linda has a tremendous background and is widely recognized as one of the country's top female executives advising businesses around the globe," Trump said in the announcement.

McMahon said her goal as the SBA chief would be to promote small businesses and help them grow and thrive.

"Our small businesses are the largest source of job creation in our country," she said.

REUTERS

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Two juveniles charged with arson in Tennessee wildfires

Thousands of people were forced to evacuate their homes and businesses during the wildfires.

Two juveniles have been arrested and charged with arson in connection with deadly Tennessee wildfires that broke out last in and around the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, state officials said on Wednesday.

Tennessee Bureau of Investigation spokesman Josh DeVine declined to release details about the juveniles because of their ages and the ongoing investigation.

Fourteen people died in the fires, which have damaged and destroyed more than 1,750 structures, local and federal authorities said in a statement.

"Our promise is that we will do our very best to help bring closure to those who have lost so much."

Gwyn

It was the highest death toll from wildfires in the United States since 2013, when 19 firefighters died near Prescott, Arizona.

"Our promise is that we will do our very best to help bring closure to those who have lost so much," Tennessee Bureau of Investigation Director Mark Gwyn said in a statement.

The remains of a home smolders after a wildfire last week in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. GETTY IMAGES

The largest of the blazes, the so-called Chimney Tops 2, broke out on Nov. 23 in a remote rugged area dubbed Chimney Tops in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, authorities said.

Fed by drought-parched brush and trees and stoked by fierce winds, the flames quickly spread, turning into an inferno that roared out of the park.

A large amount of the damage was in Gatlinburg, known as the "gateway to the Great Smoky Mountains," in eastern Tennessee, about 40 miles southeast of Knoxville. REUTERS

BRIEF

Nevada school police officer shoots student

A school district police officer in Reno, Nevada, shot a student after a "disturbance" at a high school campus on Wednesday morning, authorities said.

The shooting at Procter R. Hug High School was reported around 11:30 a.m. local time and authorities determined that a Washoe County School District police officer opened fire, Reno Police spokesman officer Tim Broadway told reporters.

One student was struck by gunfire and transported to an area hospital, Broadway said, though he could not provide the student's condition or identity.

Broadway said he could not give much information about the shooting, but said it was preceded by "some type of disturbance." He said as many as 40 students witnessed the shooting.

The school was placed on a "code red" lockdown, though police have since determined the scene to be stable.

Broadway said media reports that the shooting was a response to one student stabbing another was false. Only one student was injured in the shooting. REUTERS

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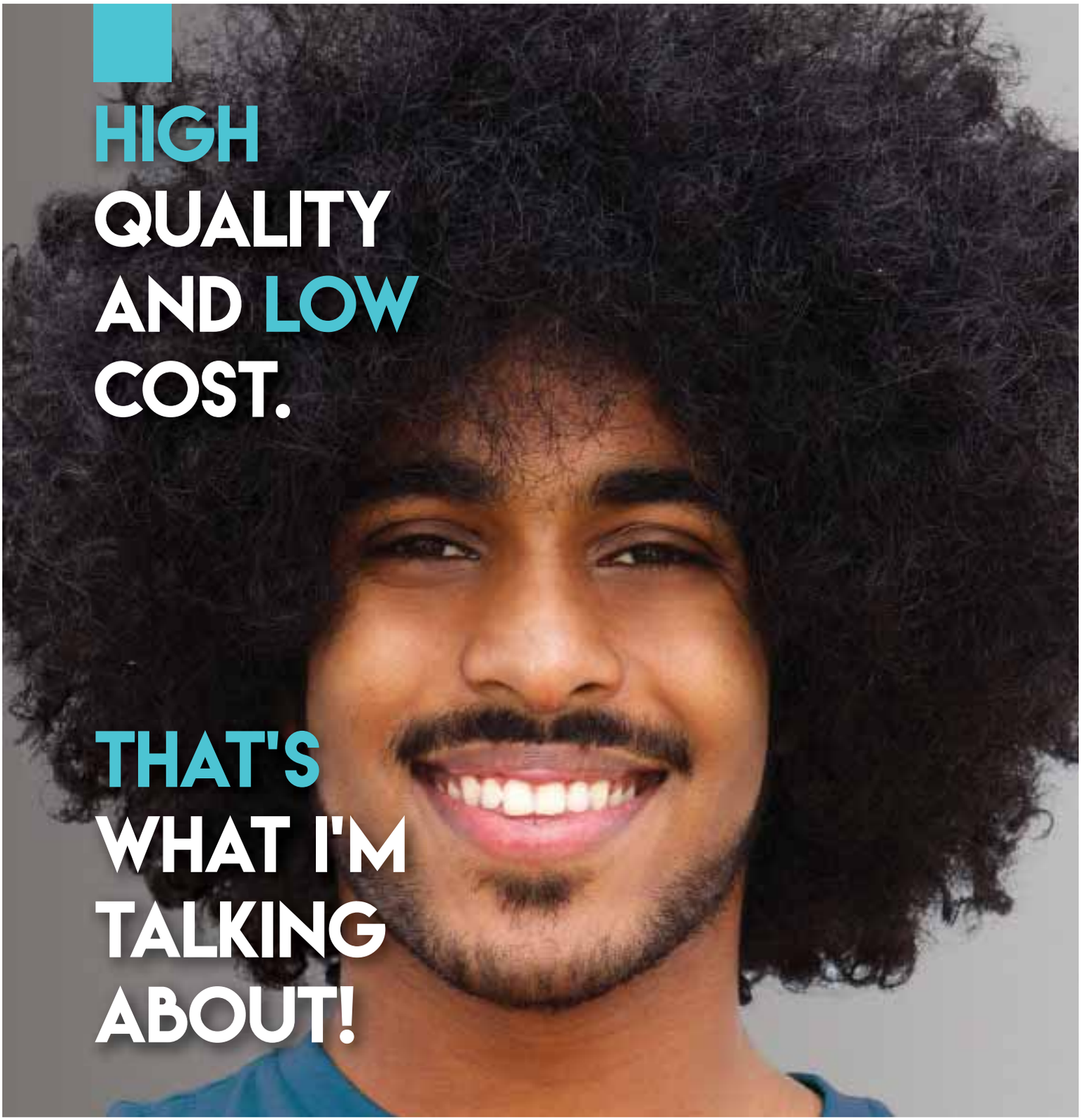

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Turner will create shows for Snapchat in expanded partnership

Turner Broadcasting System Inc. will create more video content for mobile app Snapchat and collaborate with the social media company on advertising, Turner said on Wednesday, as they expand a partnership to broaden their reach among millennials.

TV networks of the Time Warner Inc. unit, including TBS and Adult Swim, will create original series exclusively for the unit of Snap, Inc, the broadcaster said in a statement.

The companies also renewed their March agreement for Snapchat to create Live Stories, collections of user-submitted photos and videos centered around a specific event, with sports shows from Turner. The shows include the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Men's Basketball Championship and the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) Championship.

Turner will lead sales efforts for Live Stories and shows, while Snapchat will take the lead for sponsorships on the Discover channels.

Financial terms were not disclosed.

Turner formed the partnership with Snap in 2015, and forged links with other digital media companies, to court younger viewers who prefer mobile gadgets to television. Turner said its networks reach more than 75 percent of millennials each month, the same audience that Snapchat targets.

GETTY IMAGES

The partnership began with the launch of Snapchat's Discover feature which allows companies to offer and manage their own content. The original channels included Turner's CNN and Bleacher Report, a San Francisco-based sports news website.

Bleacher Report, which had been available worldwide except in the United States, France and Australia, will launch a U.S. Discover channel on Jan. 4. CNN will increase its content on Discover.

REUTERS

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Rebels seek cease-fire with Syrian army closer to retaking Aleppo

In a statement calling for the truce, the rebels made no mention of evacuating the several thousand fighters who are defending an ever shrinking area of eastern Aleppo.

A general view shows destruction in the al-Shaar neighbourhood after government forces took control of the area in the eastern part of the northern city of Aleppo on December 7, 2016. GETTY IMAGES

Syrian rebels in besieged eastern Aleppo called on Wednesday for an immediate five-day cease fire and the evacuation of civilians and wounded, but gave no indication they were ready to withdraw as demanded by Damascus and Moscow.

The Syrian army and allied forces have made rapid gains against insurgents in the past two weeks and look closer than ever to restoring full control over Aleppo, Syria's most populous city before the war, and achieving their most important victory of the conflict now in its sixth year.

Syria and Russia, which supports Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, have said they want rebels to leave Aleppo and will not consider a ceasefire unless that happens.

"It's been a tragedy here for a long time, but I've never seen this kind of pressure on the city - you can't rest for even five minutes, the bombardment is constant," a resident said.

"Any movement in the streets and there is bombardment [on that area] immediately," said the east Aleppo resident contacted by Reuters, who declined to be identified. Fear gripped the remaining residents as food and water supplies were cut off.

Retaking Aleppo would also be a success for President Vladimir Putin who intervened to save Moscow's ally in September 2015 with air strikes, and for Shi'ite Iran, whose elite Islamic Republic Guard Corps has suffered casualties fighting for Assad.

The Syrian government now appears closer to victory than at any point in the five years since protests against Assad evolved into an armed rebellion. The war in Syria has killed hundreds of thousands of people, made more than half of Syrians homeless and created the world's worst refugee crisis.

Outside of Aleppo, the government and its allies are also putting severe pressure on remaining rebel redoubts.

"The decision to liberate all of Syria is taken and Aleppo is part of it," Assad said in a newspaper interview, according to pro-Damascus television station al-Mayadeen. He described the city as the "last hope" of rebels and their backers. REUTERS

"The decision to liberate all of Syria is taken and Aleppo is part of it."

Assad said in a newspaper interview

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SpaceX to remain grounded until January

SpaceX suspended flights after one of its rockets burst into flames on Sept. 1 as it was being fueled for a routine pre-launch test in Florida.

Elon Musk's SpaceX has been forced to delay the return of its rockets to flight until January as an investigation continues into a launch pad explosion earlier this year, tech billionaire Elon Musk's company said on Wednesday.

The company had hoped to launch a Falcon 9 rocket on Dec. 16 to put 10 satellites into orbit for Iridium Communications Inc., but did not receive a required license to fly from the Federal Aviation Administration, which oversees commercial space transportation.

"We are finalizing the investigation into our Sept. 1 anomaly and are working to complete the final steps necessary to safely and reliably return to flight, now in early January," SpaceX said in a statement.

The company traced the explosion to a fuelling system problem that caused a pressurized container of helium inside the rocket's upper stage to burst.

The accident destroyed a $200 million satellite owned by Israel's Space Communication Ltd.

SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket sits on the launching pad. GETTY IMAGES

"We are finalizing the investigation into our Sept. 1 anomaly and are working to complete the final steps necessary to safely and reliably return to flight, now in early January."

SpaceX statement

In a separate statement, Iridium said it remained "confident as ever in [SpaceX's] ability to safely deliver our satellites into low-Earth orbit."

SpaceX on Wednesday declined to comment about what measures it will take to ensure the problem will not reoccur.

The company uses extremely cold liquid propellants loaded just prior to blastoff to increase the rocket's power so it can fly back to Earth and be reused.

A NASA advisory panel last month publicly questioned the safety of SpaceX's fuelling process, especially since the company has been hired to begin flying astronauts to the International Space Station in 2018.

The Sept. 1 accident was the second for SpaceX in 29 flights of the Falcon 9.

The company, owned and operated by Tesla Motors Inc. Chief Executive Officer Musk, has a backlog of more than 70 missions for NASA and commercial customers, worth more than $10 billion.

Also on Wednesday, the Russian news agency Tass reported that a third-stage Soyuz rocket engine failure doomed a Russian cargo run to the space station on Dec. 1. The accident remains under investigation.

REUTERS

BRIEF

Sony's PlayStation 4 sales top 50 million units worldwide

Sony Corp. said Wednesday that sales of its PlayStation 4 video game console had exceeded 50 million units as of Dec. 6, helped by strong demand during the year-end holiday season.

The PlayStation 4, which went on sale in late 2013, has been Sony's fastest-selling game console.

REUTERS

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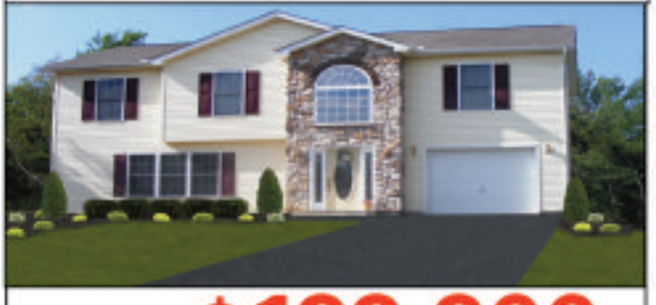

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the word

SESALI BOWEN
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Designers refused to dress Ashley Graham for British Vogue

Ashley Graham is having an amazing year. After being the first plus-size model to take the cover of Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue, she received her own curvy Barbie and was tapped to be one of the new judges on the reboot of Tyra Bank's "America's Next Top Model." This month, she was the cover girl for British Vogue. Graham is an outspoken advocate for body acceptance and is changing the face, or should we say body, of fashion.

But unfortunately not everyone is on board. In the editor's letter, British Vogue's editor-in-chief, Alexandra Shulman, expressed her disappointment that several designers flat out refused to dress Graham for the January cover. Shulman called their decision "unwise." We have less kind words that aren't appropriate for a daily newspaper.

There's a bigger picture, pun intended, that designers are clearly missing.

This is how we know Oprah & Gayle King are real besties

If your best friend only ever has nice things to say to you all the time, you need a new best friend. For inspiration, look no further than Oprah and her BFF Gayle King. The power pair has a friendship that spans decades, and they have mastered the art of keeping it real with each other.

On Monday, King Instagrammed a photo of herself making a television appearance. In the caption she shared Oprah's commentary on her accessory. "Note @oprah sent to my asst this am 'plz tell Gayle I'm on treadmill & it's hard to focus w/the circus around your neck' I think she's WRONG thoughts?"

And that's not the first time Oprah has been hilariously harsh with her friend. Us Weekly recalled another time O kept it too real about Gayle's red lipstick.

It forces the question: If your friends don't roast you, are they really your friends?

Kim, Khloe & Kourtney don't want Blac Chyna using the Kardashian name

For all their playing nice on camera for "Rob & Chyna" and "Keeping Up With The Kardashians," Kim, Khloe and Kourtney are drawing a hard line in the sand when it comes to Blac Chyna. From the look of things, the sisters do not mix business with pleasure.

In May, TMZ released documents filed by Chyna to trademark the name "Angela Renee Kardashian" for professional purposes. It's possible that as she continues to grow her brand, Rob Kardashian's fiancée might want to distance herself from the Blac Chyna moniker, which she's had since she was a stripper in Miami.

But Kim, Kourtney and Khloe are trying to block the trademark, according to documents obtained by TMZ on Tuesday. They claim that if Chyna gets the trademark, they will "suffer damage including irreparable injury to their reputation and goodwill." This seems kind of harsh, especially given that she will legally be Angela Renee Kardashian once she marries Rob.

And, honestly, if the Kardashian brand can survive sex tapes and Scott Disick, Angela Renee certainly won't kill it.

ALL PHOTOS METRO.US

Russell Crowe will not be charged for hotel incident with Azealia Banks

In one of the more bizarre stories of the year, Azealia Banks crashed a small gathering hosted by Russell Crowe back in October. Things took a dark turn when an altercation in the hotel room where the event was hosted resulted in Russell Crowe physically removing Banks from the room.

Banks pressed assault charges against Crowe, claiming that he called her the n-word and spat on her in addition to roughly tossing her out of his suite. TMZ reports that the Los Angeles County D.A. is rejecting the charges. They found his actions justifiable because of witness testimony that names Banks as the aggressor — she allegedly threatened to cut guests with a glass.

It's worth noting that all of these witnesses are friends of Crowe's who were invited to the party, which sucks for Banks.

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21 New York Thursday, December 8, 2016

Katie Holmes behind the camera

The actress takes her career in a new direction with "All We Had," which she directed.

MATT PRIGGE
@mattprigge
matt.prigge@metro.us

Katie Holmes stars in and directs "All We Had," playing a down-and-out mother struggling to eke by with her teenage daughter (Stefania LaVie Owen, left). GRAVITAS VENTURES

What Katie Holmes wanted to do was direct. But she didn't want to quit acting. The actress is both in front of the camera and behind it in "All We Had," an indie drama about a cash-strapped mother (Holmes) and daughter (Stefania LaVie Owen). Holmes' Rita has endured a lifetime of bad choices; her latest failure sends her and Owen's Ruthie on the road; they break down in a small East Coast town and try to start anew. It's not Holmes' first directing job: She previously made the short documentary "Eternal Princess " about teen gymnast Nadia Comaneci, and has since helmed an episode of the miniseries "The Kennedys After Camelot," in which she plays Jackie O.

Holmes, 37, talks to us about working with fellow actors and taking a new direction in her career.

What made you first want to direct?

It's something I've always wanted to do. I love stories, I love storytelling. With "Eternal Princess," it was about getting my feet wet. Then I got confident. I went to my agency's book department and sought material to do a narrative.

What was it about Annie Weatherwax's novel that made you think it would make a strong film?

I loved all the characters. I love the humanity of each character, and the healing that took place with each of them. I also felt like Rita and Ruthie had such a unique mother-daughter relationship. They were always on the road, always moving. There are some unconventional qualities to their relationship. Sometimes Rita's the daughter and Ruthie's the mom, and vice versa.

Was it always the idea to both act in and direct this?

It was always the idea to do both, because I really liked the role. Also, I wanted to be in the scenes with my actors. I wanted to kind of direct from within.

GETTY IMAGES

That's an unusual way of working. I think sometimes directors aren't always sure how to direct performers.

I've had wonderful experiences with different directors. I know what I like when I'm being directed; I know the environment I like to have on set. I tried to create that for the actors. When you're a director inside a scene with an actor, you can sort of lead the scene. I was really lucky, because Stefania LaVie was really open and free. We improv'd a lot. Everyone was willing to try different things. That's rare.

What do you think are the biggest challenges of directing actors?

One of the biggest is time. Feeling rushed never helps a performance. You really don't get what you need. We were able to have some rehearsal time. I always want more rehearsal time whenever I'm working as an actor. But that feeling of being rushed can happen, because you have to get a lot done in a short period of time. I tried to avoid that by working with them at lunch. We all became this moving team. We were always talking about it. Even when we were under the gun to finish in a certain amount of time, we were already sort of prepared for that. I hope it worked! [Laughs]

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Wintergarden

The Standard, East Village isn't letting its High Line sister's rink-side chalet have all the holiday glory. Sip hot drinks like gluwein and Spiked Super Dark Chocolate amid the forest of fully decked fir trees (with more for sale!) that have sprung up on Narcissa's patio, or rent a traditional (heated, of course) Alpine yurt for a fondue party ($60 per person). They're only open until 9 p.m. so make this your first stop instead of the last on your Christmas crawl. Groups of 8-10 people can reserve a hut by calling 212-228-3344. ***Through New Year's, 25 Cooper Square***

Sippin' Santa's Surf Shack

Santa doesn't want to chill out on the North Pole after pulling an all-nighter. Boilermaker goes to the beach with new Polynesian cocktails crafted by experts from Chicago (who know how to warm you up) and New Orleans (who know how to keep a party going) like the Hawaiian Milk Punch (bourbon, balsam liqueur, chai syrup). **13 First Ave.**

230 Fifth

This winter wonderland is straight from Alaska. Midtown's 230 Fifth is bringing back its glass-walled igloos for the season to make you feel like you're inside a glittering ornament looking out onto the lights of Midtown twinkling back at you. Up to 11 people can fit inside the igloos but they can't be reserved; fortunately, you have from 4 p.m. to 4 a.m. to score the city's chicest holiday photo op. ***230 Fifth Ave.***

Silver Belles

Williamsburg's Belle Shoals has transformed its indoor bar and outdoor garden into Silver Belles, with twinkling lights, snow-covered trees and specialty hot cocktails. Curl up with the Choco ... Choco ... Oaxaca (Illegal mezcal, spiked house cocoa) or next to the fire pit and put a jingling tune on the Wurlitzer jukebox. ***10 Hope St.***

things to do

Oh, what fun!

Where we'll be keeping our spirits bright through Christmas and beyond. EVA KIS

WHERE TO EAT, DRINK & PLAY

Miracle at Mace

The East Village's renown cocktail bar dons its holiday best with garlands, special glassware and all the Christmas music you've been waiting for since Jan. 1. "Santa's grotto of frivolousness" has a totally new drinks menu by Nico de Soto, with the mommy's little helper Chrismapolitan (vodka, St. Germain, spiced cranberry sauce, fig bitters, lime) sure to brighten your spirits. ***649 E. Ninth St.***

Baita

The winterized rooftop bar at Eataly's Flatiron location is back for a second year, enclosed in glass and decked out with evergreen garlands, classic travel posters, faux fur throws and snow. Baita's menu of hearty northern Italian fare includes a polenta bar, raclette three ways and mains like braised veal shoulder stew. Bring the whole crew (up to 10) and take over a wooden cabin for the ultimate experience. And unlike elsewhere in the city, the decorations will remain through April. ***200 Fifth Ave., Flatiron***

Rooftop Winter Wonderland

Good Story, the rooftop bar at Arlo Hudson Square Hotel, is pulling on its ugly Christmas sweater for the holidays with "tacky, fun, quirky" decorations. Providing the nosh is Harold's Meat + Three with all your favorite fireside bites like cheese puffs, pigs in a blanket and Christmas cookies. Themed cocktails include Jingle Juice (a Champagne punch with cognac); ask about their boozy advent calendar. **231 Hudson St.**

Rolf's

Because no Christmas bar list is complete without the OG, and still the best, example of holiday cheer. This French-German restaurant packs in giant ornaments, mistletoe, angels, garlands, icicle lights and every other Christmas decoration it can, hanging it all from the ceiling in the most festive and precarious indoor holiday display in the city. **281 Third Ave., Gramercy**

ALL IMAGES PROVIDED

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Try looking at this production photo through the "Elements of Oz" app (iPhone, Android) to get a taste of the production. PROVIDED

'Oz' comes to the real world

"Elements of Oz" fuses the classic story with all the ways it's influenced our culture.

EVA KIS
@thisiskis
eva.kis@metro.us

Augmented reality is 2016's hot trend in tech after this summer's "Pokemon Go" brought video game monsters into our world. And what better use could it have than bringing "The Wizard of Oz" to life?

The Builders Association's "Elements of Oz," now playing at 3LD Theater, was actually ahead of the trend when it opened in New Jersey last year. "All the big, iconic moments from the story have this augmented layer," explains director Marianne Weems, who got the idea to bring to life the more spectacular aspects of the story — flying monkeys, poppy fields — from one of her collaborators with experience in architecture. "I'd say we're at the cutting edge of it."

While the majority of the show unfold live onstage (it's still theater, after all), the audience is prompted to pick up their phones through the show's app at key points, whether it's to watch a video, use the augmented reality feature or other digital surprises. "It's about that dialogue between live performance and media and how we as 21st-century citizens negotiate that," she says.

There's a grain of irony to the whole thing, as Weems points out: Using our smartphones is really like escaping our own reality and into a more interesting one, after all.

Though the production follows the familiar story of Dorothy's journey from colorless Kansas to Oz's Yellow Brick Road, it's more like a framework for exploring all the ways the movie has influenced our popular culture.

From "Friend of Dorothy" as gay slang in the '40s to the alternative musical "The Wiz," speculation about economic allegories from Ayn Rand to the Tin Man representing dormant American factories, Pink Floyd's "Dark Side of Moon" synching up with it, "it is such a compelling story that people just feel they own a part of it," Weems says. "It's really about these zeitgeist moments and the kind of social and political and psychological resonances of the story."

Don't expect the production to get too bogged down even in the serious parts. The tone overall is light, dipping into comedic, especially when the cast of just three rapidly change costumes and switch roles — all of them take a turn as Dorothy.

The show, just as the film, is also very much of its time. "The story was written during the Depression, and of course the movie is a Depression-era icon of the 1930s," says Weems.

"We're in our own tumultuous time, so it really is something that in hard times, people turn to."

If you go

"Elements of Oz"
Through Dec. 18
3LD Art & Technology Center
80 Greenwich St.
$25, thebuildersassociation.org

EAT LIKE AN INSIDER

Erica Ohrling

Walking the line between Portuguese and Chinese cooking is new territory for Erica Ohrling, who's taken over the kitchen at **Macao Trading Co.** (311 Church St.), Tribeca's bi-level cocktail den and Macanese restaurant. "It's almost like the possibilities are infinite," she says of Macanese cuisine. "This is something a lot of people don't know, but it was the first real fusion, you really have influences of both sides in the cuisine."

The results range from natural parallels like the Arroz de Pato, a paella-like dish with duck confit but made with forbidden rice, black vinegar and charred scallions to a burrata with red pepper marmalade and a twist of yuzu. As a popular spot for dinner parties, Ohrling is also introducing some large format options, like a whole Peking duck ("It's so grandiose," she promises) and salt-baked fish — think a 6-pound black bass.

When she's not in her own party spot, we asked Ohrling where she likes to have fun.

Late night

"My friends opened this place called **Mr. Fong's** in Chinatown — it's just a bar, but it's awesome. And if I go somewhere to eat, I go to **Lucky Strike**, which is right down the street. I'll have a glass of wine, I'll order the lentil salad or the burger, it's an easy bistro." *40 Market St.; 59 Grand St., SoHo*

Out-of-town guests

"I take them to **Employees Only** for the speakeasy aspect, and the steak tartare is amazing. **Marlow & Sons** in Brooklyn, I love how the menu changes every day and it's always solid." *510 Hudson St., West Village; 81 Broadway, Williamsburg*

Peking duck
PAUL WAGTOUICZ

Hidden gem

"In my neighborhood, Greenpoint, there's a great restaurant called **Cherry Point**. They have a wonderful charcuterie board, the wines are delicious. I go there like, once a week." *664 Manhattan Ave.*

Under $10

"A slice of cheese pizza at **Joe's Pizza** in the West Village. It's just the best." *7 Carmine St.*

Squad meetup

"Roberta's is great for a big group of people 'cause there's communal seating. I pretty much always order their Caesar salad, a pasta and one of the vegetable-focused entrees." *261 Moore St., East Williamsburg*

Instagram-worthy

"The first thing that came into mind probably because you're not allowed to take any photos in the restaurant is the **Waverly Inn**. They have a lot of high-end guests. It's really, really a special place." *16 Bank St., West Village* EVA KIS

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Winter Beer Night

Pumpkin ales had their time to shine, but 'tis the season for some yuletide brews. This Thursday, Barcade Brooklyn taps into the holiday spirit with a drink list dedicated to 13 winter-themed beers.
Dec. 8, 4 p.m., Barcade Brooklyn, 388 Union Ave., free, Barcadebrooklyn.com

Speed Rack

The all-female bartending race returns to NYC for the sixth year with some of the top names in the biz from bars like Dead Rabbit, Dear Irving, Porchlight, Extra Fancy and Middle Branch competing to make flawless cocktails in a flash. It all goes down at the Diamond Horseshoe in Midtown, where guests dine and drink as they watch the contenders.
Dec. 11, 3-7 p.m., 235 W. 46th St., $25-$30, Speed-rack.com

TALK

Russian Media

What exactly is propaganda, and how can we separate real and fake news? If anyone knows, it's the Russians, who long ago learned to assume censorship and dissect their content for subtextual truth. Daniel Veksler, host of "Understand Russia," talks about how the beleaguered nation navigates its openly controlled media.
Dec. 8, Unnameable Books, 600 Vanderbilt Ave., Brooklyn, $16, Atlasobscura.com

"Can a Robot Feel Pain?"

"Westworld" fans may never look at a robot the same way again. You can talk out some of the show's philosophy at the Rubin Museum's Chasing Consciousness forum. This week's free talk is led by Susan Schneider, of both the Cognitive Behavior Program at the University of Connecticut and the Ethics and Technology Group at Yale.
Dec. 9, 5-6 p.m., Rubin Museum's Art Lounge, 150 W. 17th St., Free (RSVP), Rubinmuseum.org

PARTY

PROVIDED

No Office Holiday Party

Littlefield is once again hosting its party for free-range employees to gather in festive garb to embarrass themselves with karaoke and drinking games in front of pretend co-workers — the best kind of co-worker to have dirt on you. **Dec. 9, 8 p.m., 622 Degraw St., Brooklyn, $5-$8, Littlefieldnyc.com**

MUSIC

The Weepies

The singer-songwriter couple who began wooing the indie scene over a decade ago with hits like "World Spins Madly On" and "Nobody Knows Me At All" are delivering two rare live performances this week at the Highline Ballroom.
Dec. 9-10, 8 p.m., Highline Ballroom, 431 W. 16th St., $25-$45, Highlineballroom.com

PARTY

Subway Swing

Travel back in time via New York's decommissioned subway cars for a history-themed party. The Subway Swing evening starts with an express ride on the Nostalgia Swing Train from the Second Avenue station to the New York Transit Museum, where guests will be greeted by swing and jazz bands in full vintage regalia. Then it's time to boogie.
Dec. 10, 7-10 p.m., 99 Schermerhorn St., Brooklyn, $25, Nytransitmuseum.org

MOVIES

Winter Talent Show

There's no better way to celebrate the holidays than in homage to 2004 Lindsay Lohan. That means attending the North Shore High School Winter Talent Show, where you can purchase candygrams, visit the photo booth and take part in an immersive screening of "Mean Girls." Your ticket comes with a free drink and souvenir poster; remember: On Wednesdays, we wear pink!
Dec. 14, 7 p.m., Brooklyn Night Bazaar, 150 Greenpoint Ave., Brooklyn, $27-$68, Bbqfilms.com

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24 Days of Tea Advent calendar. **$40, davidstea.com**

4. Pinots are the ultimate holiday wine

Cambria Benchmark Pinot Noir. **$25, Wine stores**

5. Well, someone's been nice

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6. Expect to see her in these a lot

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9. No more frumpy flannels

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10. It's all about the bare shoulders this season

Wilfred Croquis Sweater. **$125, aritzia.com**

11. Inspire her gallery wall.

Plant Cel 1 by Mary Caspar. **$86-$212, minted.com**

12. Dress up her Chucks

Converse Chuck Taylor All Star Metallic high tops. **$65, converse.com**

13. Glam it up with fun faux fur

Ann Taylor Colorblock Furry Stole. **$75.50, anntaylor.com**

14. Her cheese board game just got even crazier

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15. Pink beanie — nuff said

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Stud

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The Davek Alert syncs to your phone, making it impossible to lose. **$125, davekny.com**

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CHUP prairie sock. **$28, bespokepost.com**

Winter is coming

Sorel Cheyanne lace full-grain leather boot. **$135, sorel.com**

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Continued on page 30

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NEW YORK LOTTERY

Continued from page 28

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An alternative holiday season

Get away from the cold and ice to discover a different way to do the holidays on Aruba.

ED CONDRAN
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If the only ice you would like to experience this Christmas is in your drink, then it's time to celebrate the holiday in warmer climates.

"Christmas in Paradise" may have been a forgettable holiday film, but the concept of families escaping the gray, winter doldrums for a Caribbean beach is spot on. Think of Aunt Sally, who'd much rather be relaxing under a cabana with a rum cocktail than cooking that Christmas bird in a sweaty kitchen. Trading your idea of a white Christmas for sand instead of snow is as easy as flying (Newark from $884) to Aruba, the island where winter never comes — but holiday traditions do.

It all starts when you enter Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort Spa and Casino (from $925 a night), where eggnog and a beach bag set the tone at check-in. The hotel puts you at the center of the action, whether that's walking to the beach or the city center, where you might run into a familiar figure.

Aruba belongs to the Kingdom of the Netherlands, so expect to see Sinterklass, the Dutch equivalent of ol' St. Nick. He's known to appear on Christmas Day — and who can blame the jolly old soul for starting his vacation after a very long night of delivering gifts around the world? Pose for a photo with Santa/Sinterklass by the island's signature dividivi tree.

If you're partial to the traditional turkey dinner, feast on a holiday meal with all the trimmings at Palms Restaurant. But if you're game enough to try something completely different, the can't-miss experience is Keshi Yena. The Aruban dish, which translates to "stuffed cheese," is made by filling the leftover rind of an Edam or Gouda cheese wheel with tangy spiced meat, onion, tomato, green pepper, olives, capers, raisins and piccalilli. It's baked until the wheel is hot and bubbly. And some bubbly, as in champagne, goes hand-in-hand with the unique island treat.

Aruba is just 18 miles from the coast of Venezuela, where the tradition of making ayacas comes from. The holiday treat is comprised of plantains, chicken, pork, ham and spices, plus a potpourri of raisins, olives, pickles and cashews. The seasonal treat served in a variety of restaurants during the week of Christmas.

The sounds of the season are provided by Gaita bands. Arubans have adopted this Venezuelan Christmas music and turned it into their own holiday tradition, typically made up of a line of female singers accompanied by musicians playing the furuku, cuarta, bass and conga. Catch their festive rhythms during the holidays at shopping malls and business districts.

The party continues until New Year's Eve, which is a big deal in the Southern Caribbean. Arubans celebrate Dande, which literally means "to carouse." Locals throughout the country wish each other success and happiness via song. The upbeat and rhythmic Dande tunes are delivered on the beach and in town.

The tradition of fireworks to ring in the New Year has made it to the island, but the pyrotechnic shows are different in Aruba. Called pagara, these long string of Chinese firecrackers end in large, dramatic displays are set off throughout the days leading up to New Year's Eve to ward off evil spirits for the coming year. The largest pagara is set off mid-afternoon on New Year's Eve in the heart of downtown Oranjestad on the main boulevard, with the climactic ending in front of the Renaissance Mall.

Spending Christmas week in balmy Aruba is certainly a tempting alternative to chilling out in the Northeastern corridor. You may not be able to make a snowman, but that means no one has to de-ice the car or shovel snow, either.

Ayacas are a savory holiday treat. ALL PHOTOS ARUBA TOURISM AUTHORITY

You'll still get your fill of holiday decor in Oranjestad. JUSKA WENDLAND, FLICKR

Gaita bands bring rhythm-centric melodies to the streets.

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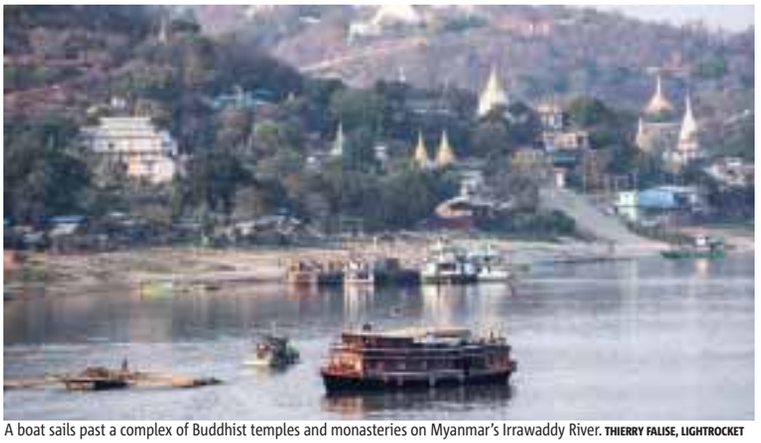

A boat sails past a complex of Buddhist temples and monasteries on Myanmar's Irrawaddy River. THIERRY FALISE, LIGHTROCKET

Norway

Picture yourself on a sparkling fjord, floating along a crystal-blue waterway carved into a range of snowy mountains. Cruising around the Arctic Circle in Norway aboard a Hurtigruten or other cruise line is a unique way to easily reach many of its small, historic coastal cities — like Alesund, Tromso and Trondheim.

Myanmar

Recent major evolutions in the political system helped boost tourism in Myanmar. But because roads and other basic infrastructure are slow to get up to speed, cruises along the Irrawaddy River are a wise way to go. River cruises also remain the most tranquil, magical way to explore ancient cities like Bagan and Mandalay.

The Amazon

Howler monkeys, pink river dolphins, toucans, sloths, macaws and other fauna in their natural habitat — the wildlife alone will remind you why a waterborne South American vacation is worth your time. Smithsonian Journeys offers a 10-day, 500-mile tour down the Peruvian Amazon with cultural excursions.

Inside Passage

Cruises up the west coast of Canada and Alaska aren't uncommon, but there are quite a few small-scale options able reach more remote inlets and fjords — including the intricate Inside Passage — that offer a sense of discovery no big ship ever could. One cool option is aboard a deluxe 12-passenger Westwind Tugboat Adventure where you may spot bears, whales and eagles during the weeklong voyage.

Andalusia, Spain

Head south for glimpses of ancient Europe that feature Moorish architecture, flamenco and equestrianism. Andalusia is the region of southwest Spain from which Columbus set off for the Americas, one of several stops along a journey by CroisiEurope, one of few companies operating from Cordoba to Seville to Cadiz — one of the oldest inhabited cities on the Iberian Peninsula.

South Pacific

Art and history are the themes for Paul Gauguin Cruises' 17-day voyage from Fiji to Bali, which stops at key World War II historical sites, offers exotic snorkeling excursions in the turquoise waters, and docks at obscure ports like Lombok Island — home to its very own Fountain of Youth.

Suez Canal

Only a handful of companies offer routes through the vital passage that links the Mediterranean and Red seas, but Azamara Club Cruises rivals them all with its 17-day journey from Mumbai to Athens with stops in Egypt, Israel and Jordan.

South Africa

Travelers hungry for a unique African adventure will savor an extended coastal cruise around the southern cape. Silversea has one of the most exciting, featuring excursions from safaris and canoeing to tribal village visits and nature walks. Its 15-day cruise to the Mother City originates in Mombasa, Kenya, and travels down the coast with stops in Tanzania, Mozambique and Madagascar.

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FANTASY FOOTBALL: THE PLAYOFFS ARE FINALLY HERE

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Lewis the better option

With the No. 1 rush defense coming to New England in the Baltimore Ravens, Dion Lewis may be the preferred Patriots running back in Week 14. While LeGarrette Blount is one of the most reliable fantasy backs in the game right now, you can bet Bill Belichick will scheme to attack his opponent's weakness, as he normally does, which means not a ton of Blount's ground-and-pound runs up the middle. Lewis should have no problem finding room to work, and you can always count on Tom Brady to find his pass-catchers in space so they can make plays.

Thielen a flex favorite

Adam Thielen has now posted 10 or more PPR fantasy points in five straight games, and 13-plus in each of his last three. That is exactly the kind of floor you want from your flex player. It doesn't need to be an earth-shattering performance, but it needs to not drag your team down. While many would attribute Thielen's success to Stefon Diggs' recent absence, Thielen still thrived with Diggs back in the mix, catching seven balls for 86 yards in Week 13. In Sam Bradford's dink-and-dunk offense, there is a ton to like here if you're looking for a streaming option.

Bye, bye Brandon

Here's a fun tidbit: Brandon Marshall was drafted as the 18th player overall in fantasy drafts this year on average. Through Week 13, he is player No. 124 in total scoring, even falling behind some defenses and kickers. Most (if not all) of Marshall's struggles can be blamed on poor quarterbacking, and things certainly aren't going to improve down the stretch. The Jets announced Tuesday that they will start rookie QB Bryce Petty for the rest of the season, and while Petty has potential, he is far from polished. Marshall can only score if someone can get him the ball, and that simply won't be the case. With your season on the line, look elsewhere for WR production.

Sleepers of the week

Each week we will identify three players worth taking a shot on in deeper leagues.

Ladarius Green, TE, Pittsburgh Steelers – Green finally broke out in Week 13, shredding the Giants with a 6-110-1 line. He could be the No. 2 option that Big Ben and the Steelers have been looking for.

Mike Gillislee, RB, Buffalo Bills – More than just a handcuff, Gillislee is coming off an 8-49-2 line and should remain in the mix to spell LeSean McCoy with Tyrod Taylor struggling.

Tyler Boyd, WR, Cincinnati Bengals – Has a great matchup against the Browns this week, and has 15 targets over his last two games. May not find the end zone, but the yardage and receptions should be there.

Brandon Marshall won't do much for you the rest of the way. GETTY IMAGES

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JUST A HUNCH: ELI IS GOING TO GET ON TRACK VS. DALLAS

OPINION

SID ROSENBERG
@sidrosenberg

Eli Manning has proven he can still sneak out wins for the Giants, but Week 14 at home against a divisional opponent is a game Eli has to flat out win. This game is the turning point of the Giants' season not only because it is a divisional game but because Big Blue is the only team to beat the Cowboys this season. But that was the first week of the season, and the Cowboys haven't lost a game since. Meanwhile, the Giants have been folding like a beach chair of late.

For the Giants to bring an end to Dallas' 10-game winning streak, Manning has to play his best game of the season. All signs are pointing in Manning's favor to play well, but in the end it's about execution. Statistically the Cowboys have been bad against the pass this season but have held opposing quarterbacks to under 200 yards over the past two weeks.

Manning did have one of his better games of the season in Week 1 against Dallas and over his career he has a 91.1 quarterback rating against the Cowboys. That leads me to believe Eli is due. Dallas' secondary is playing some of its best football recently, and that does warrant some skepticism, but the matchup is shaping up to be a good opportunity for Eli to get back on track.

That being said, believe it or not, I say there is still a concern at the quarterback spot. Eli is clearly not an "elite" quarterback anymore and the clock is ticking on his body. The Giants' offensive line hasn't given up more than three sacks in a game all season but they have play better in the running game to keep Eli from using his legs too much. It is not good news for Giants running backs or offensive linemen as Dallas owns the league's second best rushing defense. It's going to take a collective effort to keep Eli upright with time to make plays. You can bet that it'll be a battle in the trenches on Sunday night in the swamps of New Jersey.

Expect big things from Eli Manning on Sunday night. GETTY IMAGES

With hopes that Eli can keep his game on track, it's more than enough reason to believe that Odell Beckham Jr. will benefit from good quarterback play — and the numbers are in Odell's favor, too. Dallas' secondary has giving up 173 receptions to opposing wideouts this season, which is tied for most in the NFL. OBJ has gotten double-digit targets the past two weeks and if the Giants coaching staff is smart, it will get the ball in his hands early and often.

Sterling Shepard could also be in for a big day. Over their past two games the Cowboys' secondary has given up eight receptions a piece to two very talented slot receivers in Washington's Jamison Crowder and Minnesota's Stefon Diggs. Nether Crowder or Diggs managed to find the end zone, but they were getting plenty of looks and made some key catches that kept drives alive.

This is a make or break game for the Giants this weekend. They have given us fans a reason to worry over the past couple of weeks, and beating the best team in the NFL could shape up to be a season-changing win. We are in for a good ol' NFC East showdown Sunday night.

Lily Yip looking to build a ping-pong powerhouse

Tiny Pillar College ready to become a table tennis juggernaut.

KRISTIAN DYER
@KristianRDyer
sports@metro.us

Lily Yip hits the ball during the USA Open Table Tennis Women's All-Stars at the Fort Lauderdale Convention Center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in 1999.
GETTY IMAGES

Lily Yip is convinced that Pillar College (with literally no history in athletics) can become a highly-ranked and respected program in, of all sports, table tennis.

This week, Yip was introduced as the first-ever head coach at Pillar College, a school based across three campuses in New Jersey and boasting a growing student body of 637 students. Pillar has never had a table tennis team before; in fact this is the Christian college's first foray into athletics beyond intramural sports. They will participate in the National Collegiate Table Tennis Association, playing several nationally ranked programs this year.

Yip began playing the sport at a young age in China, widely regarded as the powerhouse of table tennis in global competitions. She will coach Pillar but also play for the team.

In China, Yip says, there is a culture around table tennis as she herself grew up playing the sport. At 15 years old, just a couple months before she was supposed to graduate from high school, she turned professional with a contract from the Chinese government. The goal was for Yip to become a standout at the international level.

But the Olympics, the goal of every Chinese athlete in the program, was never to be for her ... at least not for her native country. Life would take her instead to a new country, a new home.

She came to the United States in 1989 at age 24 to be united with family, not to further her table tennis career. She wanted to get an education and was prepared to leave the sport that had been such a big part of her life. The move to America, where the sport is more commonly called ping-pong and fails to register among football, baseball and basketball — was not a move to advance her athletic career. She was prepared to put away her athletic ambitions for good.

"After the professional life is finished of an athlete, there was nowhere to go. Nothing to do," Yip told Metro. "Of course I wanted the 'American Dream.' The life, education. The dream. So I made the move. I didn't think sport was in my future."

Little did she know that her past as a highly-trained athlete in China would pave the way for her future. She began playing in local table tennis tournaments for the exercise and to no one's surprise she dominated the competition. Winning she says, "makes you feel good," and she continued to play (and win) tournaments. A couple years later Yip played in a qualifying tournament for the United States Olympic squad, eventually being ranked third in the nation. From there it would only grow as she was part of the Olympic teams in 1992 in Barcelona, and then again at the Atlanta games in 1996.

In 2004 she would be inducted to the USA Table Tennis Hall of Fame and this past summer in Rio, Yip was the head coach of the United States.

Now she is at Pillar — enrolled at the college, coaching, playing, and earning her masters degree in counseling.

"A lot of blessings from God. The United States gave me an opportunity to continue the sport. I have made so many friendships here through this sport," Yip said. "At the same time, I can renew my education here. I can contribute more and share the skill I have."

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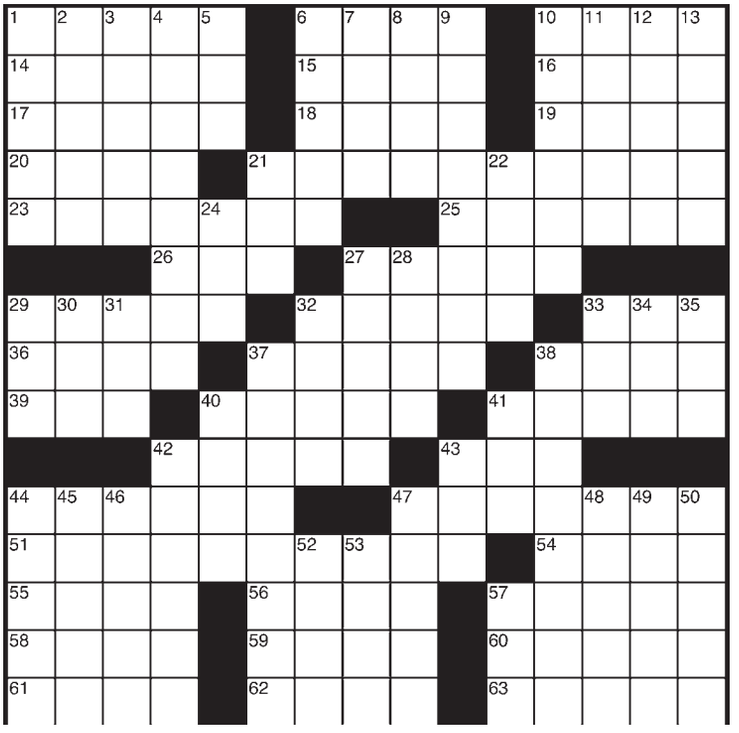
Across
1 New growth
6 Recipe meas.
10 Diner special
14 The good dishes
15 Low voice
16 Black-and-white snack
17 Thoroughfares
18 Fossilized plants
19 Longish skirt
20 Opposed
21 Restaurant takeouts (2 wds.)
23 Fuzzy fruits
25 Victorian garment
26 Rock concert souvenir
27 Country singer Patsy --
29 Weaker, as an excuse
32 Nest builders
33 Laugh syllable
36 Very pleased
37 Cheech's partner
38 Modicum
39 Fair-hiring letters
40 Basketball venue
41 Smudge
42 Keen
43 Knock politely
44 Hoodlums
47 Give credit
51 Gratis (3 wds.)
54 Ben Jonson works
55 Spunky movie princess
56 Woes
57 Not touching
58 Insect resins
59 "-- drummers drumming ..."
60 Snicker (hyph.)
61 Wooden strip
62 Capricorn's symbol
63 Moderate gaits

Down
1 Discard
2 Hold the --!
3 Gaucho's rope
4 Charged with a crime
5 Tank filler
6 Baja fast food
7 Surfer's reading
8 Antler bearer
9 Walking a beat
10 Durango dude
11 Verdi numbers
12 Swamp grass
13 Raise, as a sail
21 Joey or Kiki
22 Nearly forever
24 That girl
27 Old hag
28 Jazzy -- Horne
29 Size above med.
30 Pub pint
31 Chairman --
32 Hone
33 Ground breaker
34 Depot info
35 Pitcher handle
37 Flattening
38 Racy
40 Throb
41 Cul-de- --
42 Horrified
43 Half a dangerous fly
44 Bridge fees
45 Cager Shaq --
46 Ancient Phoenician port
47 Money in the bank
48 Popular potato
49 Jaunty lid
50 -- Park, Colorado
52 Mishmash
53 Radius companion
57 Legal rep



metro.us/sudoku

easy

		1	2	7			3	9
							8	1
9		2				4	5	
			8					2
	6		4		5		1	
8					3			
	4	6				1		3
1	7							
3	2			1	7	5		

hard

5					4		6	9
7		4	2	8				
		2	5					
	1				5	7		
	5		9		7		8	
		7	8				1	
					8	4		
				4	2	1		3
1	4		3					8

metro.us/horoscopes

Aries Emotions will be difficult to control. Consider all the angles before you jump into something that may not be right for you. Romance should be a priority.

Taurus Gather information and discuss your ideas with someone who may put a damper on your plans if you try to move forward without approval. Resolve a health issue.

Gemini An unexpected proposal can turn into a fiasco if you overspend. Get the costs before committing to something that has the potential to turn into a money pit.

Cancer Get your work out of the way before someone criticizes you. Taking on too much will be unproductive and leave you in an awkward position.

Leo A short trip or friendly meeting with someone who shares your beliefs and strategies will lead to an intriguing proposal. Take more interest in children or elders.

Virgo Network with people who can help you flesh out an idea that will secure your position. Don't give in to anyone putting demands on your time or asking for money.

Libra It's an opportune day to make arrangements to do something unique with a loved one. Letting your life become too mundane or routine will cause dissatisfaction.

Scorpio Don't let your emotions cloud your vision. You have to look at the facts and be willing to take some of the blame when disagreements come into play.

Sagittarius You are dedicated and ready to pursue whatever it takes to make your life better. Setting up a workstation at home will lead to greater income.

Capricorn Emotions will flare up. Don't let the actions of others upset you. Back away if you don't want to take part in something. Trust your judgment. Be a leader.

Aquarius Share your feelings with someone you want to spend more time with. Joining forces with someone searching for similar results will lead to a victory.

Pisces Look past discord and opposition, and remain intent on reaching your goal regardless of others' actions. Your victory will come from intelligence and strength. EUGENIA LAST

Yesterday's answers

M	U	E	S	L	I		L	E	D		R	A	S	H
A	T	O	M	I	C		O	B	I		E	L	M	O
C	A	S	I	N	O		S	O	N		C	I	A	O
			R	U	N	N	I	N	G	B	O	A	R	D
M	O	C	K	S		A	N	Y		O	U	S	T	S
U	S	E	S		R	U	G		G	O	P			
S	A	L		J	I	G		B	O	S	S	I	E	R
I	K	E		U	G	H		A	L	T		B	R	A
C	A	B	I	N	E	T		C	D	S		S	U	N
			N	I	L		B	A	S		K	E	P	I
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G	A	I	N		P	A	W		A	P	A	C	H	E
I	N	N	S		A	R	I		S	A	T	E	E	N
T	E	T	E		M	I	N		S	L	E	E	P	S

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